



# Soldiers on

Story by Beth Reece

Harriet Rice



Capturing the elegance of the tune "Sparkling Diamonds" are, from left, SGT Rodney Watts, SSG Greg McPhee, PFC Jonathon Smith, 1LT Angel Stone, SPC Randy Batarao, SPC Mark Catarroja and SGT Albert Latuch.



Cast and crew members belt out a rousing finale as a gigantic American flag billows in the background.

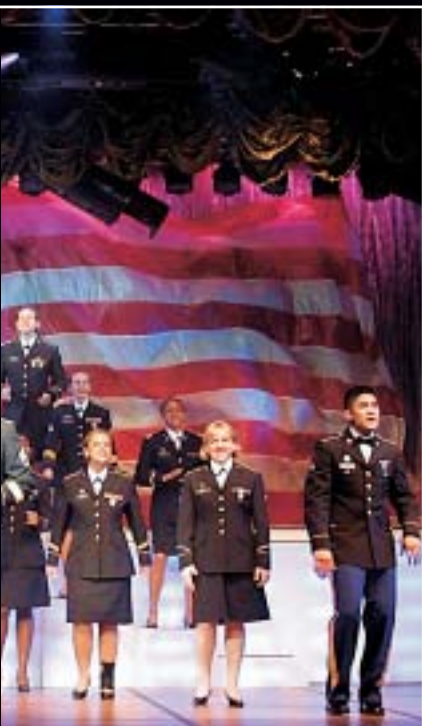
"Freedom  
is Not  
Just a Word"

Douglas Ide



SPC Mari Kootnz, a military police soldier stationed in Giessen, Germany, gives a fiery performance during the show's Latin-flavored segment.

# Stage



Douglas Ide



Paul Disney

**SPC Tryce Fink plays fiddle while SGT Kathy Heidecker, SGT Sharon Tongul and LTC Ann Gordon sing the Dixie Chicks' "Some Days You Gotta Dance."**



Douglas Ide

**SGT Diana Bond of Fort Sill, Okla., puts a lot of emotion into her performance of the Jo Dee Messina hit "Bring on the Rain."**

**P**ERFORMERS in the 2002 U.S. Army Soldier Show have found that being a soldier is about more than protecting freedom. For some, it's also a call to inspire and encourage, said SSG Q.P. Bean, a show cast member.

"I think it's important for people to know that soldiers have talents that allow them to take away sadness and make people smile even as America fights wars," Bean said.

A 90-minute, live musical on tour through November at installations Armywide, the Soldier Show spotlights the talents of 24 cast and crew members from such MOSs as infantry, signal and transportation. It's a production of the U.S. Army Community and Family Support Center's Entertainment Division, and is one of more than 200 morale, welfare and recreation programs the Army provides soldiers and families worldwide.

The show debuted in May at Fort Belvoir, Va., and attracted viewers to the door an hour and a half before the curtain rose. Appearing at 54 installations in 20 states and six countries in Europe and the Middle East, the production features a variety of music, including pop, country, gospel, oldies, R&B and jazz. An opening number titled "Freedom is Not Just a Word" is followed by such songs as Celine Dion's "A New Day Has Come," Brooks and Dunn's "Only in America"

and Shakira's "Whenever, Wherever."

"We've got something for everyone to enjoy, and most of the songs are easily recognizable," said LTC Ann Gordon, a reservist and the highest-ranking soldier ever to perform in the show.

Audiences who see the show today in its refined, well-rehearsed form may think the performers are professional artists who've spent years honing their voices and movements, said artistic director Victor Hurtado. He's watched the cast members ripen into what he calls "total pros," and likes to think audiences will be wooed by the performers' creative gifts.

## Boot Camp for Stars

The show's stars have weathered constant scrutiny since their showmanship, talent and poise snagged them roles during late-March auditions.

"They're going to be on the spot to perform every single night, so they have to be perfect," Hurtado said. "They've got a lot of mental and physical hurdles to clear before we take the show on the road, and there won't be room for sensitivity."

Hurtado doesn't hesitate to correct performers' mistakes. "I call them on things immediately. But I also tell them they can't feel bad every time they do something wrong, because mistakes are inevitable."

Superstars perfect their perfor-





**SPC Tryce Fink adds variety to this year's Soldier Show by sharing her instrumental talents.**

Paul Disney

mances over months or years; these soldiers had just six weeks to mature into professional singers and dancers. Twelve-hour days were the norm, and the anticipation of live performances was as nagging as it was exciting.

SPC Jaye Pineda-Chavez said she lost 15 pounds because of the rigorous dance workouts. In rehearsals she lost four days of practice because of a damaged knee, and the constant singing strained her voice.

"But it's worth the pains to be part of something this big," she said.

The show's broad musical range requires performers to portray various emotions through voice and movement. A certain pitch of the voice might signal heartache, for example, or a stretch of the arm could communicate need.

In early rehearsals for a mixed duet of country hits, choreographer Maurice Johnson encouraged SGT Rodney Watts and SGT Diana Bond to use gestures to lure audiences into the song's story.

"You have to establish a relationship the audience will feel," Johnson told the performers. "Trust me. You'll get a feel for this as you rehearse the routine."

Faster tunes challenge cast members to control their breathing

while dancing and singing simultaneously. Johnson — who has worked with production teams for Michael Jackson and Madonna, among others —

eased rehearsals by slicing routines into segments, allowing cast members to gradually memorize whole songs.

"Putting all the routines together into one performance was the hardest part," said SPC Robin Smith. "At first, it was impossible to remember what step went with what part of what song."

And there were those, like Bean, who started rehearsals with two left feet. "My worst memory of rehearsals is when everyone had finished learning their numbers, but I was still working through mine," he said.

While fellow cast members headed home after 12 hours of rehearsals, 1LT Jennifer Sherwood — whose stage experience includes performances in "Grease" and "Annie" — stayed behind to help Bean clean up his act.

"We've worked as a team from the beginning," said Gordon. "This has made a big difference during costume

**Show schedules, cast biographies, performance photos and information about how to audition are available on the Army's morale, welfare and recreation Web site at [www.armymwr.com](http://www.armymwr.com).**

## The Crew

**B**EHIND the scenes, six unseen but essential crew members make the Soldier Show cast shine.

"We couldn't do this show without the technicians. They deserve a lot of credit. Without them we'd be standing under a street light without a set, and with no sound," said cast member LTC Ann Gordon.

The crew includes a stage manager, floor manager, light technician, wardrobe technician and two audio technicians. They operate computer-based lighting and audio functions to

add spotlights and color throughout performances. They can also increase the volume on microphones for performers with soft voices.

Lead audio engineer SSG Robert Boucher said he's honored to work with a cast "so incredibly talented."

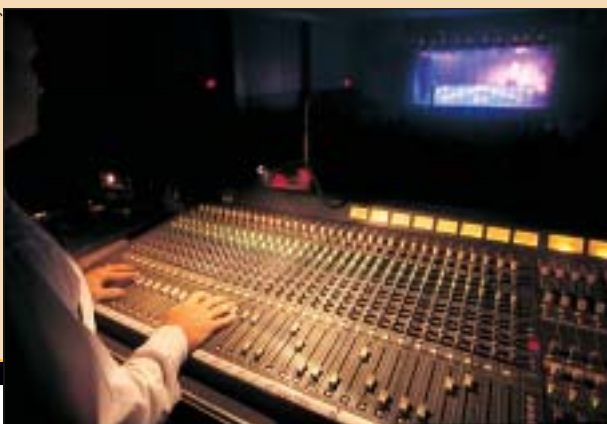
"I'm blown away every time I see them perform, and I'm thankful that we have top-of-the-line equipment to help bring their performances together," he said.

The crew also

includes six military drivers with commercial licenses. They drive an 18-wheel tractor-trailer that hauls most of the production's equipment, as well as a 44-passenger bus and 15-passenger van for staff and costumes. — *Beth Reece*

**SSG Robert Boucher enhances the show with sound and lighting adjustments on computerized equipment.**

Paul Disney



# Manual Labor

**F**ORMER SMA Robert E. Hall called the Soldier Show the most grueling duty apart from combat. It's no surprise, because cast members mount and tear down almost 20 tons of stage equipment per show.

"This is 80 percent of what we do. Entertaining is only 20 percent," said SPC Joey Beebe, who returned as this year's production assistant after performing in the 2001 show.

More than one million pounds of electrical, sound, lighting and stage gear will pass through the cast and crews' hands before the tour's end. That includes four miles of cable and 125 theatrical lights.

While it can take almost 14 hours for a new cast and crew to set up the stage for the first time, they'll do it in

less than six hours by the time the show returns to the East Coast for its final performances in October and November.

Dismantling the stage takes about two hours, after which cast and crew members load everything onto an 18-wheel tractor-trailer.

Much of the equipment is heavy and requires caution while setting up. As the highest-ranking member of the cast and crew, LTC Ann Gordon has adopted the role of safety officer. She ensures soldiers wear hard hats and construction boots during setup, and listens for sounds that signal something is wrong with the stage's framework.

Because stage work is so exten-

Paul Disney



**SPC Randy Batarao adjusts support cables for the stage's framework.**

sive, Soldier Show finalists were given a taste of the hard labor during audition week.

"We wanted them to know how hard it is — that the show isn't all about performing," said Beebe. "Plus, we wanted to see how they'd work together as a team, because it takes everybody to do it right." — *Beth Reece*

changes, especially when we perform in back-to-back songs."

## Beyond Sight and Sound

"A good voice and a knack for dancing aren't enough, so much more has to come from within," said Hurtado, who starred in the show from 1986 to 1989 and later produced "Sounds of Unity" with Kenny Loggins. "It's an indescribable quality that you can see, but can't teach."

Elvis had it. Madonna has it. "I'm talking about stage presence. People with this gift can look into the audience and make every person feel as if the singer is performing just for them."

While Hurtado thinks cast members will connect with audiences on a superficial level because they're all soldiers, he's found that his performers have a sincerity that he trusts will deepen the connection.

Cast members also bring their own instrumental talents to several performances. SPC Tryce Fink performs a lively fiddle tune. And Watts strums guitar to "The Red, White and Blue," a song he wrote, which aired on a Kentucky radio station early this year.

The cast's versatility no doubt enhances the show, Hurtado said, but

he is still most pleased with the range of voice styles.

"I've got every instrument I need," he said. "I've got one person with a rich, deep, but still feminine voice with beautiful bravado. I've got girls who can wail really high. And I've got the sincere, sweet, yet masculine voice."

Most performers have said stardom isn't their goal, and many miss their families and the jobs they left behind.

"I'm enjoying myself here, but I also look forward to going back to my husband and my job," said Pineda-Chavez, an aircraft dispatcher.

Some performers have confided their higher aspirations to Hurtado, asking for the secret to success.

"It's not fair," he said, "but fame is more often about luck than talent." So he urges them to measure success by personal growth and audiences' reactions.

"Judge yourself by looking into people's faces and what they say after the performance," he tells them. "When a 4-year-old and a 90-year-old both tell you how much they enjoyed the show, then you know you've touched a person directly."

And inspiring others to feel, he said, is exactly what the Soldier Show is about. □

Douglas Ide



**1LT Jennifer Sherwood (front), SGT Timora Green (left) and SPC Robin Smith sing "Lady Marmelade" in the show's "Moulin Rouge" segment.**